

Galettene: Cake or Sex or All Three

The true story of Gelitin By LIAM GILLICK

Artists who work together benefit from the creation of the semi-autonomous grouping. Coming together creates some ability to counter the stresses that are the result of excessive projections and expectations. Some artist groupings lack individual identities — that’s the point — they are collective and submit to the overall aims of working together. Gelitin neither avoid stress nor have those involved become completely subsumed within the collective. They posit a role that functions between the overt assertion of individual identity and the evasive potential of the group.

It was all so different in the beginning. A story of fights, arguments and a final resolution that saw half of the original Galettene [sic] — named after the famous Galette de Rois, or King Cake — leave for a communal life in the Dordogne region of France. The four abandoned youngest members moved back to Vienna — where they renamed themselves Gelatin (later Gelitin) — in mockery of their former partners. From the mid-’90s onwards little has been heard of the reclusive French group, while their Viennese protégés have subsequently swamped us with an excess of collective libido, corrupted critique and consistent exceptionalism.

It was the puff pastry outer layers of the King Cake that first inspired the eight-strong arts collective Galettene in the ’80s. They believed that art functions like that. It merely creates layers on top of a sickly corrupted culture. The almond frangipane filling — so condensed and sweet — somehow stood in for the lure of a uniquely Austrian cake-based *gemütlichkeit*. For them, society’s problems were not poverty, hypocrisy or repression but a belief that modern European culture is too easy, too seductive. Galettene’s methods were simple: to make people happy and stressed simultaneously. Their techniques were virtually invisible. They inserted themselves into the daily life of the Austrian provinces and produced high-quality eco-products — primarily cakes and bread — in order to reveal the critical potential of an endless search for quality. It was their contention that this raising of quality through the production of baked goods with a particular appeal to the educated classes would lead to increased desire for more quality — a rejection of the mass-produced and an eventual collapse of capitalism. It would be a slow process. And in the best tradition of the Left, the process mainly involved critiquing and undermining others involved in the new food consciousness. Their one achievement was the plotting of the Austrian white wine Diethylene Glycol (antifreeze) scandal in 1985, which led to a new eco-consciousness in relation to future Austrian wine production.

This critique of eco-consciousness via food production was carefully documented by art student and early Galettene member Ali Janka — then working as an apprentice in a photo lab in Neuhofen an der Krems, just south of Linz. He let the older founders of the group process their films for free — conveniently handing over the printed photographs right in front of his bosses, pocketing the payment and then returning it during their nighttime efforts to perfect the tiny porcelain figures found in the center of the traditional Galette de Rois.

Janka was born in Salzburg in 1970 — the same year as all the other members of the breakaway Gelitin apart from Tobias Urban, who is four years older and was the last to leave Galette. Urban, against some resistance from the others, was finally admitted to the new group on the understanding that he destroy all the porcelain molds at the bakery and piss in the almond sacks as a confirmation of his loyalty to a new collective assertion of freedom. Janka grew up in a large house at the edge of Salzburg. He had been eager to join the original eight-person Galettene as a way to get over the stress of sleeping in a three-boy bunk bed as a child. After a childhood hell in proximity to two older brothers, he was drawn to the idea of an idealized brotherhood as a comfort against his childhood stress. He hated chaos and despised his brothers’ stupid good looks. A scruffy, unkempt and unsophisticated teenager, he was drawn to the elegant dress and love-hate relationship with the bourgeoisie embodied by Galettene. Confronted one day in his idiotic photo-lab job by elegant

older men offering a taste of sophistication, it was the original older members who suggested he leave the dead-end career and move to Vienna to study at the University of Applied Arts. He was a failure from the start. His newly acquired expensive suits and fussy approach to food — including installations of lavish meals of organic food — were against the mood of the time. Unsurprisingly, he failed his diploma first time around, finally passing only once he had reluctantly cobbled together a superficially post-structural argument for his obsession with style and ecology. Never truly accepted in the original group, he now faced rejection once more.

Tobias Urban never found things that hard. It was he who always pushed against the restrictions of the first incarnation of what was later to become Gelitin. Raised in Munich, he was brought up in relative luxury. His father had nine children with four different women, and home life was far from boring as a result. Thankfully, his mother’s work as a child psychologist was always left outside the front door. Tobias was free to work on his drawings and writings, which even as a child showed extraordinary prescience and an engaging wit. It was the Munich art context that damaged him rather than the haut-bourgeois lifestyle he had grown to love. The bickering and point scoring that he witnessed during openings and conferences around the city drew him towards a statistical analysis of relationships. Rather than think about images and words, he turned to numbers. To this day he relaxes by reading stock market figures or calculating the demographic breakdown of visitors from the statistics that he always asks for whenever Gelitin produce a new project for a public institution. It was this love of numbers that drew him into the original Galettene. A young man — at that point still studying at the fine arts academy in Vienna — he would spend every lunch time alone with his small daughter — born when he was still in high school — in the finest cafés. He was always absorbed by the financial section of the newspaper or some new report on Austrian financial affairs. His love of expensive suits — ordered but rarely paid for in true demi-monde style — and his fascination with the world of numbers was so striking to the older members that they took him on immediately as the perfect person to analyze the tastes and trends at the heart of the ever-expanding Austrian food movement.

Wolfgang Gantner — the third member of the breakaway group — grew up in relatively modest surroundings in the Hernals district of Vienna near Schloss Neuwaldegg. Some days and many nights were spent on the streets of the city in search of something more. He often skipped school and helped his mother in her electrical supply store until one day a priest came in search of bulbs shaped like candle flames; young Wolfgang was entranced by his black dress and calm demeanor. From that point on all yearning and school skipping ended, and he devoted himself to the life of an alter boy. Dressed in a fine white smock with a ruffled collar and bright shiny shoes, he would stand radiant next to the priest, holding candle sticks or candle snuffers — offering his perfect hands up to hold the ribbon place-marker from the massive bible and generally being at one with his priest. His enlightenment came through the process of confession. One of his tasks was to stand in attendance whenever the priest offered confession to the faithful who had strayed. Wolfgang tried to keep the lavish descriptions of moral turpitude and sexual deviance at bay, but by the age of sixteen he could bear it no longer. After hearing a particularly repressed set of extraordinary confessions, he followed the humiliated and well-dressed man straight out of the church and into a new life as part of Galettene. The structure of confession would never leave him. It would become the basis of his aesthetic trials. Truly freed and encouraged by the nascent group to study public relations *and* political science, he unsurprisingly failed to finish his university studies. The application of all those confessions was too strong an urge to resist; he was often too tired to complete his university work, and his baking and cake-making tasks were complicated by his newfound sexual liberation. Sleeping with as many people as possible would make graduation impossible and create chaos within the original group — who had always confessed their desires and never realized them.

It was not as if Gelitin ever intended to work together. They had been sucked into a circle of older dilettantes and ended up alone by default. There is no leader because none of them had really understood the early work at the heart of the aspirant Austrian upper-middle classes. Gelitin were abandoned rather than formed by choice. They were left behind and thrust into a situation of potential due to a lack, rather than an excess, of intentions. So it was that the youngest four, now renamed Gelitin, turned up in New York in the mid-’90s. They tried to take up residence in the World Trade Center in place of the original group but were laughed out of the building — only to return five years later with their notorious *The B Thing* (2000) balcony project. The original group had already ordered vast quantities of catering equipment in an attempt to become a softly disruptive presence at the heart of the new urban farmer’s markets springing up around the city — some of this stuff can be seen in the backgrounds of photographs documenting *The B Thing*.

Florian Reither is the only country boy of the group. Growing up the son of a pig farmer turned village butcher, he was twelve when his family moved to Schattendorf on the border between Austria and Hungary. Pigs walked into the shop on a Monday and left as sausages on Wednesday. His three sisters were given the main task of sausage making and serving customers while Reither was treated like a little prince. Left to his own devices, he spent hours working on large-scale drawings for reconfiguring the border villages of the area in anticipation of the collapse of the Eastern Block. A stern, taciturn and scolding teenager, he alone had actively contacted the original Galettene group rather than merely fallen under their influence. He had secretly offered them bio-sausages — created by his oldest sister according to an old family recipe — but was rebuffed and repeatedly turned down. Reither had only been in the original collective for one week when he was as stunned as the other young acolytes by the founders’ departure for France. A solid family life behind him, Reither had married young, hoping to be calmed and centered by the comforts of family life. His own daughters, however, were far from the passive servant sisters he grew up with. Through the actions of the wild and unkempt young girls he finally saw his own potential and introduced the other members of the newly formed Gelitin to their energy and unbridled brilliance.

For Gelitin, the question would no longer be “What should we produce?” The original group was uninterested in the problems of art — issues that they relegated to the background while they proceeded to attempt a complete undermining of taste through assertion and obsessive brainstorming about what should be produced in the field of bio-cuisine. The abandoned core of the group was obliged by poverty and their own girlish potential to do something else. There was something special between them — not intellectually, but in the way they were at ease with each other and finally free of bourgeois anxieties. They abandoned plans, strategies, recipes and fine suits, instead embarking on a series of remarkable free-form activities. No longer caring about the art world or the anxieties of the superficial eco-conscious middle-classes that they had left behind, the sorry young group decided to show up for and somehow complete the existing list of exhibitions and residencies left behind when the true founders had left with their original Moog’s and the remainder of their porcelain molds in search of a French countryside that might still offer some pure pleasures — at least in the realm of food and drink. The subsequent story of Gelitin is well known. Their early works are indistinguishable from their late works — they care little for development and even less for progress. Their method is accidental — their trajectory unknown. Their characters are both close at hand and somehow out of reach: abandoned, humiliated, but content.

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